

INTERPRETING THE MAURYAN EMPIRE: Centralized State or Multiple Centres of Control ? *

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In 1837, James Prinsep deciphered the Asokan edicts and in 1901, Vincent Smith published one of the earliest histories on the subject titled, *Asoka: the Buddhist Emperor of India*. Since then, the Mauryas, dated between 317 and 186 BC,¹ have maintained their central position in ancient Indian historiography. Nor has this attraction diminished with the passage of time. On the contrary, the legacy of Asoka has entered its latest and modern phase. This is in the context of the Navayana or Neo-Buddhist path forged by B.R. Ambedkar on the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's *parinirvana*.² Ambedkar's primary focus seems to have been not so much to change the Brahmanical system, but to "use a polemical critique of Brahmanical religio-social dominance as the foundation upon which to develop an Indic based alternative to the Brahmanical social order" (Blackburn 1993: 5). In the quest for social justice against caste hierarchy in modern India, a new meaning is being given to Asoka as a champion of the downtrodden and a protector against Brahmanical oppression, while at the same time drawing on the Theravada Buddhist tradition.³

This paper does not aim to retrace the historiographical debates on the Mauryan Empire. Instead, I attempt to draw attention to two of its salient aspects, i.e., the polity and Asoka's *dhamma*. These are discussed primarily in terms of the archaeology of frontier regions such as the Deccan, with data from northwest and eastern India used for comparison. My objectives for undertaking this

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¹ Eggermont, 1956, based on the *mahaparinirvana* of the Buddha in 368 BC.

² Ambedkar studied anthropology and law and was a prominent member of the committee that drafted the National Constitution of independent India. This committee also adopted the use of the Sarnath lion capital and its wheels as the symbol of the new Republic. These recommendations have to be viewed in the context of Ambedkar's personal convictions. On October 14, 1956, Ambedkar held a public conversion or *diksa* at which he and half a million of his followers left Hinduism and converted to the Neo-Buddhist faith (Tartakov, 1996: 120).

³ Like the village deity and national deity, there were family deities also who were worshipped through the Brahmins. The priests who used to go for worshipping these deities started influencing the affairs of the state through the queens. Asoka after embracing Buddhism discontinued this practice and removed the idols of such deities. Asoka said, "As I venerate the Buddha, the Enlightened One, there is no need to worship any other deity". This action of Asoka disturbed the Brahmins very much as it ended their unfair means of livelihood and exploitation. They pledged to take revenge for this loss (Ambedkar, 1982: 113 as quoted in Ahir, 1995: 122). It must be remembered that this book was not completed before he died. Instead the notes written by Ambedkar were edited afterwards (Fitzgerald, 1999: 64).

exercise are twofold: first, to underline the complexities involved in centralized control of diverse economic activities such as trade; and second, to assess the position of Asoka in the expansion of Buddhism to the different regions of South Asia — a role that traditional Buddhist writing has generally credited him with.

I maintain in this paper that the centralized model of Mauryan control needs to be re-examined, as it seems to have been predicated on inadequate appraisal of the archaeological data. Much of the discussion concerning the centralized nature of the state continues to be based on the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (e.g., Bongard-Levin 1985: chapter IV.2; Thapar 1997: 117),⁴ though it is generally accepted that the text in its present form dates significantly later, to the early centuries of the Common Era (Trautmann 1971). In one of my earlier studies⁵, I have shown that even for that period, data from the *Arthashastra* need to be contrasted with early Buddhist sources for a balanced appraisal. The latter, including the Sri Lankan Chronicles, are among the most important sources for the study of Asoka's *dhamma*, although perhaps somewhat maligned in recent years, as I shall discuss later.

Several scholars have already drawn attention to the inability of Mauryan polity to exercise control over its provinces. Thus, Fussman (1987-88) has suggested that Mauryan administration was not only decentralized, but that control over the outlying provinces was asymmetrical. In contrast, scholars have failed to explore questions concerning the asymmetric control exercised by the Mauryan state over the diverse economic activities that provided the much-needed revenues for its functioning. That is, the emergence of the state has been linked to the expansion and control of agricultural activity, but there has been insufficient discussion of the state's capacity to control an equally important economic activity — trade. It is the contribution and relative autonomy of trading activity that forms the primary focus of this paper. I am suggesting here that trade and exchange are by no means by-products of agricultural expansion, as is often accepted by historians,⁶ but are activities integral to all societies. Archaeological evidence from Iron Age sites in peninsular India provide a long pre-Mauryan prehistory of exchange and trade in the region, both overland and coastal.

⁴ Thapar 1997: 117: "This area (Ganga plains) would be under a high-powered, centralized, bureaucratic control, being the nucleus of the empire, and may have approximated the pattern of government described in the *Arthashastra*. The text therefore may be said to relate not to an imperial system, but possibly to the functioning of a metropolitan state within such a system".

⁵ *Monastery and Guild: Commerce under the Satavahanas*, Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁶ Thapar postulated a shift from the pastoral economy of the pre-Mauryan period to a village economy based on agriculture under the Mauryas (Thapar 1997: 55). "Comparative permanence of settlement" is said to have resulted in trade and the "establishment of a mercantile community through a system of guilds"(ibid.). "One of the more important results of the political unification of India under the Mauryas, and the control of a strong centralized government, was the impetus given to the various crafts. With the improvement of administration, the organization of trade became easier and the crafts gradually assumed the shape of small-scale industries" (ibid.: 72).

To present an overview of these developments is an ambitious task and instead I focus on a few key issues, which will be discussed largely in the context of peninsular India and Sri Lanka. The first concerns the nature of authority of the Mauryan Empire and the degree to which trade and trading activity were controlled by the state. To what extent did the state initiate changes that led to transformation of the social and economic fabric of the peripheral regions? Second, I explore the interaction between religion and polity, focusing especially on the role of Buddhism. This interaction has hitherto been studied in the context of the Brahmanical religion and from two main perspectives: one, the sacred character of the early Indian state; and second, the process of legitimization through which political authority sought to validate its power and authority (Bhattacharya 1994: 42). In contrast, my emphasis is on Buddhism and the role of the Buddhist clergy in forging channels of communication and proselytization in frontier areas. In this, clergy often formed close links with caravans and trading groups whom they accompanied through forested tracts and inhospitable terrain. This also meant, I argue, that monastic centers emerged as autonomous centers of authority that maintained their distinctiveness from the state. How then do we define the Buddhist legacy of Asoka? To what extent was Asoka's policy of *dhammavijaya* a success? Was there a distinction between the public and private beliefs of rulers? Was Asoka a Buddhist in his personal affiliations, but a liberal or secular personage to the people? A third, related, question concerns the purpose and message of Asokan edicts in peninsular India. It has often been assumed that literacy was limited to a select group and the Asokan "inscriptions would then be symbolic of a statement of power in an oral society" (Thapar 1997: 281). To what extent is this contention valid?

It is the Sri Lankan tradition that preserves the memory of Asoka as a Buddhist king and this makes it imperative to incorporate the data from the island. As I will discuss below, the archaeological data from the site of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, the center of power during much of the early period on the island, indicates a long process of change and transformation from the middle of the first millennium BCE onwards. The Chronicles attribute this to the expansion of Buddhism under Asoka and also emphasize the contribution of kingship rituals in the unification of the local polities. The Buddhist concept of kingship is, however, a much debated theme. Historians have suggested that the Chronicles, such as the *Mahavamsa*, date to a later period and its authors modeled their accounts of the Buddhist king on Asoka rather than the other way round.⁷ I attempt in this paper to reopen the debate with reference to trade and maritime contacts between peninsular India and Sri Lanka and the extent to which early polities controlled these commercial links.

⁷ This is evident in the debate between S.J. Tambiah and R. Thapar in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, NS, 21, 1, 1987.

It is these and related questions that the present paper seeks to address. I will avoid references to the *Arthashastra* as far as possible and instead draw on archaeology, inscriptions, and early Buddhist literature (i.e., the *Vinaya Pitaka* and the *Anguttara* and *Samyutta Nikayas*).⁸ Most studies on Asoka have tended to discuss the Indian subcontinent as a single unit. There is, however, a need to distinguish between developments in the Ganga plains and those in regions south of the Vindhya, east of *madhyadesa* and northwest of Taxila.

Archaeology of the Peninsula

The archaeological correlates often used to demarcate the extent of the Mauryan Empire are ceramics, such as the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), punch-marked coins, weights, widespread use of iron implements, and beads of semi-precious stones (see, for example, Allchin 1995).⁹ Significantly, none of this evidence dates exclusively to the Mauryan period, i.e., from 317 to 186 BCE, but instead belongs to a larger time-bracket that falls between 550 BCE and 100 BCE.¹⁰

North India

In the Gangetic region, perhaps the most significant change in the mid-first millennium BCE was in the settlement pattern. A settlement hierarchy is in evidence in northern India by 400 BCE, with the largest sites, surrounded by monumental earthen ramparts, dominating the major arteries of communication (Erdosy 1995: 108). At the bottom of the scale were nucleated village settlements, inhabited by agriculturalists and herders. In between were minor centers and towns, which have revealed data for the manufacture of ceramics and lithic blades, finished and unfinished beads, as well as for metal smelting. Several of these towns were fortified, the ramparts serving defensive purposes and also demarcating cities from the surrounding landscape.

The largest sites of the period were the capital cities and political centers (ibid: 107). It is no coincidence that these included the capital cities of principalities known from early Buddhist sources, such as Rajgir (of Magadha, until superseded by Pataliputra), Campa (of Anga), Ujjain (of Avanti) and Rajghat (of Kasi). Perhaps the southernmost centers in this list were Besnagar near Sanchi and Tripuri

⁸ Though the Buddhist Canon was written down in Sri Lanka around 100 BC, it is generally accepted that major portions of the *Sutta* and *Vinaya Pitakas* belong to the pre-Asokan period. The Bhabhra edict of Asoka provides evidence for this in that it refers to specific passages for study by monks and nuns. Four of the passages have been identified as forming part of the first four Nikayas.

⁹ Stratigraphically, the earliest coins appear in mid-NBPW levels dated to 400 BCE. Thus the earliest coin hoard at Taxila dates to the mid-fourth century BCE. This evidence, however, casts doubt on the Achaemenid derivation of the bent-bar coins of Taxila (Erdosy 1995: 113).

¹⁰ Erdosy, 1995: 105 dates the NBPW period into early (550-400 BCE), middle (400-250 BCE) and late phases (250-100 BCE) within this larger time bracket.

in central India (ibid: 110). This representation of a broad cultural unity across north India is impressive. But what is intriguing is the marked contrast this northern region presents when compared to the region south of the Vindhya, which continues to be little known, but was by no means uninhabited.

The locale of a great deal of activity in the early Buddhist literature is also north India and more prominently the Ganga plains. The texts refer to urban centers and practices that emerge quite strongly include moneymaking and gift giving.¹¹ The *Nikayas* and the *Vinaya* texts expound on the subject of money: how to earn it legitimately and how to effectively use it to accumulate this-worldly and otherworldly gains.¹² A donation made by the physician Jivaka, a *gahapati* of Saketa, was comprised of 16,000 coins, a male and female slave, and a horse chariot (*Vinaya* I.172). The most frequently used term in the texts for money is *bhoga* and it is listed among the ten most desirable things.¹³

Statistical analysis of early Buddhist literature yielded a total of 1009 place names. Of these, 842 or 83.43% refer to the five major cities of the north, while the rest cover 76 different types of settlements categorized as market towns (*nigama*, see below), villages (*gama*), and countryside (*janapada*). Outside this central area, there are references to a few places in the Deccan associated with the Buddha's disciples, the *thera* and the *theris*. These include centers such as Supparaka (Sopara on the west coast), Bharukaccha (Bharuch at the mouth of the Narmada) and Patitthana (Paithan in Aurangabad district) (Gokhale 1982: 10). I turn to this region below.

Peninsular India

Unlike the developments in the north, there were no contemporary fortified centers in the south and no evidence of Mauryan settlement, except scattered finds of NBPW and black-slipped wares at coastal centers. Early nuclei of settlement along the east coast were located in the lower valleys of the Ganga (at Tamluk), Mahanadi (at Sisupalgarh), and Krishna (at Dharanikota and Amaravati). Associated with this period are sherds of the Northern Black Polished Ware and Black-slipped Wares, often dated to the fourth-third centuries BCE. Further south in Tamilnadu, no definitive chronological brackets can be assigned to the megalithic urn burials and the Black-and-Red Ware sites found in the Vaigai-Tamraparni river basins and northward along the coast. However, by

¹¹ In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the Buddha explains to Anathapindika five good reasons to acquire money (III: 45-6; Wagle, 1995: 190-1).

¹² Nevertheless Buddhist writers were aware of the imbalance and disparity of wealth found within society and the fact that in reality money can subvert justice and that lack of it can result in an abject humiliation of a person. Craving for money, however, does not bring happiness, because such cravings are impermanent, without substance and false (*Majjima Nikaya* I. 450-52; Wagle 1995: 197).

¹³ The other nine are beauty, health, virtues, life of continence, friends, truths, understanding, *dharma* and heaven (R. Morris & E. Hardy, *Anguttara Nikaya*, London: PTS, 1885-1910, 5 volumes, V: 135). Money is referred to

the second-first centuries BCE, this coastal system had expanded to include the entire stretch of the coast (Ray 1994).

In contrast to the coast, the interior areas of peninsular India were home to the iron-using megalithic communities in the first millennium BCE. Chronologically, the Iron Age megalithic sites span several centuries, from 1200 BCE to 300 CE, and extend across all regions of peninsular India with the exception of the western Deccan or present Maharashtra. Of the total number of 1933 sites discovered so far, the largest concentration (34%) is in Karnataka, followed by 31% in Tamilnadu (Moorti 1994: 4-5).¹⁴ A more recent survey of published literature suggests a similar database of 2207 megalithic sites. Of these 1668 were cemeteries, 55 were habitations, 128 were both habitations and burial sites, and the association of 356 sites was unclear (Brubaker, forthcoming).

The sole indicators of Asoka and the Mauryan Empire in peninsular India are the inscriptions written in the Brahmi script in the eastern dialect of Prakrit (**Figure?**). These may be classified into rock edicts (major and minor), cave inscriptions, and pillar edicts (major and minor). As compared to the diversity of the records in the north, the majority of the inscriptions from the peninsula are the minor rock edicts. This homogeneity is particularly noticeable in the cluster in Karnataka, though there are exceptions elsewhere in the Deccan. Portions of the major rock edicts have been found at Sopara (VIII, IX), Sannathi (XII, XIV on face A and Separate Edicts I & II on Face B) and Erragudi (I-XIV), while a fragment of a minor pillar edict somewhat debatable is known from Amaravati (Allchin and Norman 1985).¹⁵

Of the seventeen known sites of minor rock edicts in the subcontinent, ten are clustered in Karnataka in Bellary, Raichur, Koppal, and Chitradurga districts (at Maski, Siddapura, Brahmagiri, Nittur, Udegolam, Jatinga-Ramesvara, Gavimath and Palkigundu) and in the Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh (Rajula-Mandagiri and Erragudi). Siddapura, Brahmagiri and Jatinga-Ramesvara lie in an area within a radius of three kilometers around Siddapura, while Gavimath and Palkigundu are located within three kilometers of each other (Sircar 1979: 53). The minor rock edicts are also said to form the earliest group of Asokan inscriptions, followed by the major rock edicts. The pillar edicts were the last to be promulgated, but no example of these has so far been found in the peninsula (Salomon 1998: 136).

as bringing two kinds of happiness: one is happiness resulting from the lawful acquisition of money and its expenditure on meritorious deeds; the second is happiness due to debtlessness (*Anguttara Nikaya* II.66-67).

¹⁴ The quantification in Moorti's study is based on published material. Much of this data has been generated by a random recording of sites and not from systematic surveys. It is possible that these figures would change with inputs from exhaustive archaeological explorations.

¹⁵ It is also in this region that the scribe has often added his name in Kharosthi.

In his minor rock edicts, Asoka refers to himself as a Buddhist *upasaka* and expresses his desire that Buddhism percolate down to the lowest level to include elephant-trainers, charioteers, teachers and scribes (Sircar 1979: 12). It would seem that the southern versions all belong to a single recension, which was issued for engraving extensively on the hills at one specific time, as indicated by the reference to 256 nights.¹⁶ The *dhamma* of these records is largely ethical, with the injunction to: “Obey mother and father, obey the teachers; have mercy on living beings; speak the truth and propagate the dhamma” (ibid.).

It is significant that these inscriptions are located in the vicinity of megalithic sites, which both pre-date and post-date the Mauryan Empire. Historians have attempted to explain this lack of archaeological evidence for Mauryan presence in peninsular India by suggesting that since mines were under the control of the state as mentioned in the *Arthashastra*, local elite may have been used to function as suppliers of mineral resources to the Mauryan centers. This would have required only the presence of “an administration limited to the senior levels in the region” (Thapar 1997: 272).¹⁷

This argument may be countered on several grounds: first, there is no evidence in the inscriptions of any such interaction between the Mauryas and the elite in the region. Asokan inscriptions refer only to the local elite in *neighboring* regions, i.e., the Colas, Ceras, and Pandyas located to the south. This is further substantiated by an analysis of the data from megalithic sites, which indicates the largest concentration in contiguous regions, along the river Krishna in Andhra and the Kaveri further south. Nor is there any evidence that the Mauryas controlled the gold mines of Karnataka. In contrast, after iron, gold was an important resource mined and exchanged by the local megalithic communities.¹⁸ Radiocarbon dates for a sample of charred wood found in an old working in the Hatti mine in Karnataka suggest the beginnings of gold-working in the region by the eighth century BCE (Allchin 1981: 81-3).

A study of site sizes indicates that the larger megalithic sites were found not at locations of Asokan inscriptions, but along major routes of communication. These routes are known to have

¹⁶ Asoka’s Minor Rock Edicts I and II are said to have been issued earlier than his fourteen Rock Edicts (Sircar, 1979: 116).

¹⁷ This ties in with Thapar’s argument that Magadha was a metropolitan state with flexible control, rather than a primary state. “The control of the metropolitan state over the peripheral areas would be through administration, the upper levels under central authority and the lower levels under local authority. This bifurcation would be possible if the major concern of the metropolitan state was to collect tax and tribute and even plunder during campaigns, but not to restructure the economy of the peripheral areas in an attempt to integrate it and bring it into a uniform pattern” (Thapar, 1984: 160).

¹⁸ 7 habitation sites, 148 burial sites and 22 habitation-cum-burial sites are known to have been located in the vicinity of gold resources. Not only was gold mined, but also exchanged as is evident from finds of gold ornaments at widely dispersed sites. This is further supported by the fact that 60% of the megalithic sites were

continued in the subsequent post-Mauryan periods. Perhaps the most interesting is the stretch extending from the Palghat gap (see Abraham, this volume) and Coimbatore to the Kaveri delta (Moorti 1994; also Ray 1994: chapter II). An analysis of the dimensions of sites indicates that there were at least 26 large settlements, each capable of supporting a population of approximately 1000 residents. Fourteen of these were concentrated in the Coimbatore-Madurai uplands (ibid: table 2.6). One especially significant site for this paper is Kodumanal on the northern bank of the river Noyyal, a tributary of the Kaveri. The site straddles the ancient route from the Palghat gap eastward to Karur and Uraiyr along the Kaveri. The site dates from the late Megalithic to the Early Historical periods (c. third century BCE to the third century CE). In addition to the large number of megalithic monuments at the site, excavations have yielded evidence for a vigorous iron-smelting industry and the manufacture of jewelry from rock crystal and carnelian. Nearly two hundred inscribed potsherds were found at the site in stratified contexts. These are mostly in Tamil, written in the Tamil-Brahmi script, with a few in Prakrit in the Brahmi script. These have been dated through archaeomagnetic tests to between 300 BCE and 200 CE (± 50) (Mahadevan 1996: 59). The inscriptions on the pots include Tamil names such as Kannan Atan, Pannan, Antavan Atan, etc., and Sanskritic names like Varuni. One burial (megalith II) yielded a sherd with the name Visaki. Another significant discovery was the presence of the term *nikama* (Rajan 1996: 79). Nor is this the sole evidence for the presence of a *nikama* or *nigama*.

The Nigama

The Pali dictionary derives the meaning of the term *nigama* from the Sanskrit root *gama* with the prefix *ni*. The compound term thus has the sense of coming together or meeting.¹⁹ On the basis of early Buddhist texts, Wagle defines the *nigama* as a *gama* composed of more or less integrated members of various kin groups and occupational or professional groups. It is therefore a larger and more complex economic and social unit than the village or *gama* (Wagle 1995: 21). Another related, though distinct, term is the *negama* or assembly of persons connected with the *nigama*.²⁰

The terms *nigama* and *negama* are found inscribed on unbaked clay sealings from several sites in north India. The earliest of these date from the Mauryan period (Thaplyal 1972: 223).²¹ Beyond the northern plains, there are references to the *nigama* in inscriptions from early Buddhist sites. The

located in regions with no known mineral or ore resources nearby (Moorti, 1994: 14-5; also Ray, 1994: chapter II).

¹⁹ *Pali-English Dictionary*: 190.

²⁰ The association of the term with cities like Rajagṛha and Sravastī has led to the suggestion that it indicated a ward in a city (Wagle 1995: 23).

²¹ A sealing from Hargāon, district Aitapur, now in the Lucknow museum, bears the legend *negama* in Mauryan characters together with a tree in railing symbol (Thaplyal 1972: 223).

nigama of Karahakata in the Deccan is mentioned in the second century BCE inscriptions of the Buddhist site of Bharhut in central India (Cunningham 1879: 131, no. 16). Similarly, there are references to the *nigama* of Dhanyakataka along the east coast in Andhra (*Epigraphia Indica* XV: 263). Both the *gosthi*²² and the *nigama* existed at Dhanyakataka. It is significant that both Dharanikota and Amaravati are located at the point up to which the river Krishna is navigable and may be defined as landing places for the coastal traffic. The Krishna takes a sharp turn at this spot and the association of Amaravati with the river is preserved in a stele discovered during clearance of the site in 1958-59. Engraved on one of the faces is the legend: “the *gosthi* called Vanda at Dhanyakataka” together with the representation of waters (Ghosh & Sarkar 1964 & 1965: 175).

The *nigama* continues to be associated with urban centers in the post-Mauryan period. Several seals found at Bhita near Allahabad bear the legend ‘*nigamasa*’ in Kusana Brahmi, perhaps representing the authority of some autonomous urban administration (*Archaeological Survey of India — Annual Report 1911-12*: 56). The term *nigama* also occurs in the region around Madurai in Tamilnadu where fifty-five inscriptions in Tamil-Brahmi have been dated between the second century BCE and the second century CE. A record from Nasik in Maharashtra of the early centuries CE provides some clues regarding the use of the term. It mentions that donations of land were first proclaimed in a *nigama-sabha*; these were then written down on cloth or else on a copper-sheet by an officer and delivered to the donee (Senart 1902-3: 82-5). The somewhat later Damodarpur copper plates refer to elite such as the *nagara-sresthin*, a *sarthavaha* and a *prathama-kulika* associated with a *nigama* (*Epigraphia Indica* XV: 130 & 133).

It is then evident that in the third-second centuries BCE, rather than the Mauryan state or its senior administrators, it was the *nigama* and its members whose presence is attested to in peninsular India. The location of these inscriptions in coastal areas and along major routes is significant and is in marked contrast to the cluster of Asokan inscriptions in the interior of Karnataka. The purpose and nature of the inscriptions is a vexed question, outside the scope of this paper. There is nevertheless a strong case for the *upasaka* king Asoka attempting to spread the Buddhist dhamma through his minor rock edicts, at least in peninsular India, as will be discussed later.

Occupational groups associated with wealth and commerce

An occupational group that figures prominently in early Buddhist sources is the *gahapati*. The term has an earlier beginning in Vedic literature, where it is used for the head of the household. In contrast, the Buddhist sources describe the *gahapati* as a producer of wealth and as a donor. His

²² The term *gosthi* has been translated as committee or association and occurs in the inscriptions of Sanchi, Bhattiprolu and Mathura.

occupation was connected with agriculture and cattle keeping and his affluence was stupendous (Wagle 1995: 186-7). Mendaka *gahapati*, resident of Bhaddiya nagara is represented prominently in the Vinaya both for his psychic power and for his generosity (H. Oldenberg, ed., *The Vinaya Pitaka*, 5 vols, London 1924, I: 240-44).²³ The *gahapatis* are referred to as employing two categories of wage laborers, the *karmakaras* and the *bhrtakas*, in contrast to references to *dasas* or slaves. Asoka makes a mention of the *bhatakas* and the *dasas* in the IXth Rock Edict at Girnar. Taxation also appears in Asoka's texts; in his Rumindei inscription, Asoka refers to the village of Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha as being exempt from taxes and only one-eighth being paid in future.

A second occupational group responsible for accumulating monetary resources was the entrepreneur. *Vannijja* is a general term used for commercial or trading activities and is mentioned together with agriculture and cattle keeping as one of the higher occupations (*ukkattha kammam*, *Vinaya Pitaka*, IV.6). The texts contain frequent references to caravans and carts moving from one place to another.²⁴ Sea-merchants are described as going on voyages and taking with them birds to sight land (*tiradassim sakunam gahetva*, *Anguttara Nikaya*, II.368). Elsewhere there is a reference to a sea-going ship beached on the shore for the winter (*sammuddikaya nava*, *Anguttara Nikaya*, IV.127). In contrast to this profusion of literary references, there are hardly any references to trade and trading activity in the inscriptions of Asoka.

Trade and Market Centers

In peninsular India, archaeological data provides adequate evidence for a long prehistory of exchange and trading networks in the pre-Mauryan period (Ray 1994: chapter II). Moorti's (1994) study of the distribution of megalithic sites in peninsular India indicates the occurrence of about seventy sites (out of a total of 1933 sites) within a distance of 20 kilometers of the known iron ore zones. On the other hand, 60% of the sites have no mineral or ore resources nearby (Moorti 1994: 14). Yet iron objects, especially weapons, are widespread both in burials and at settlement sites in peninsular India. In fact, 92 excavated burials studied yielded a total of 285 weapons (Moorti 1994: 108). Thus, there is clear evidence not only for trade and exchange, but also for increases in conflict

²³ The description of Mendaka, though unusual symbolises his role as tax-giver, since he pays wages to the king's army. He is also a donor par excellence and he institutes a gift of 1250 cowherds to serve the Buddha and the Sangha. Above all what is striking is his affluence (Wagle 1995: 186-7).

²⁴ The Buddha once met Belattha Kaccana travelling from the city of Rajagaha to the town of Andhakovinda with 500 wagons filled with jars of sugar (*Vinaya* I.224). There are references to horse dealers from Uttarapatha travelling to Veranja with 500 horses (*Vinaya* III.6). Kasi was known for its cloth, sandalwood and bronze dishes (*kosalika kamsapati*, *Samyutta Nikaya* I. 106).

and aggression in the Iron Age as compared to the earlier periods. In addition, the effort required for the construction of megalithic monuments indicates mobilization and organization of labor by these societies. The variability in the scale of the megaliths — ranging from simple urn burials to large stone circles enclosing elaborate chambers — suggests "a multitude of small, predominantly locally oriented systems of varying scale and geographic extent" (Brubaker, forthcoming). These data indicate the presence of armed and organized communities in multiple regions of peninsular India, and raise questions regarding both the nature of interaction between the Mauryan Empire and its contemporaries to the south, as well as the ability of the Mauryan Empire to enforce its authority on its southern neighbors.

Rather than viewing the state as the sole center of control and authority, what is being visualized in this paper is a disaggregation of the model, with the state one of several nodes of power in society. Other nodes included merchants, landowners, and religious functionaries. The state had no doubt devised various mechanisms for the collection of revenue and taxes and for enforcing its authority on its core region. Contemporary Buddhist texts such as the *Vinaya* (IV.31) mention a caravan proceeding from Rajagaha to the south, with the intention of evading payment of taxes. The king's officers or *kammikas* find this out and confiscate the goods (Wagle 1995: 178).

However, it would have been a much complex process to integrate the diverse regions of the Mauryan periphery. Largely on account of their mobility, traders were able to historically retain their autonomy. It was the outlets and market centers that empires tended to control for taxes. The *Vinaya* (III.52) refers to tax collecting centers located at passes, fording points on rivers and the gates of a *gama*.

A study of the archaeological and inscriptional data from the Deccan indicates that the expansion of trading activity in the Mauryan period resulted not from direct intervention of the Mauryan state, but at the initiative of private enterprise (Ray 1986: chapter IV). Merchants and guilds exploited the mineral resources of the Deccan, but there is little to suggest economic integration of the region within the Mauryan state. Similarly, there is no evidence to indicate Mauryan control over transport routes²⁵ or even of a communication network between Pataliputra and the southern provinces that would have made effective military control possible.

An analogy with a later period may not be out of place. The Mughal state in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, maintained an efficient system of couriers on a relay basis. This allowed them to dispatch instructions at distances exceeding 100 kilometers per day. Even under a comparable system,

it would have required thirty days for a message to be communicated from Pataliputra in Magadha to Suvarnagiri in Karnataka in fair weather and probably twice as long during the monsoons. Hence, without an effective communication mechanism and concentrations of troops at strategic locations it would have been impossible for the Mauryan state to maintain effective control in outlying regions. This has led scholars to “a priori assume the existence of local representatives of the king who had at their disposal a large amount of power” (Fussman 1987-1988: 56). But this again is an assumption that cannot be supported by current archaeological data.

Sri Lanka and The Coastal System

The Kodumanal finds cited above gain further significance in view of data now available from Sri Lanka. Archaeologically, the island seems to have been colonized in the Mesolithic period²⁶ and the evidence suggests a change from the Mesolithic to the Iron Age, with no intervening Copper-Bronze Age. This transition to the Iron Age is dated between 900 and 600 BCE and is marked by paddy cultivation and the introduction of the horse and domestic cattle.²⁷ The earliest known protohistoric settlement at Anuradhapura extended over 10 hectares by 800 BCE.²⁸ At Anuradhapura (ASW2), this phase is marked by black and red burnished ceramics, iron slag, and iron objects. A small number of sherds bearing graffiti, generally termed megalithic, are known from this period. The subsequent period is dated between 510-340 BCE and archaeological evidence indicates a more permanent occupation of the site. A pit burial from this period yielded four sherds bearing portions of Brahmi inscriptions, though no skeletal remains were found associated with it (Coningham et. al. 1996: 81).

Archaeological excavations in the citadel area at Anuradhapura have provided evidence for a change in the nature of the structures between 360 and 190 BCE.²⁹ It was at this time that a rampart and ditch were constructed around the settlement. The faunal record showed a high proportion of seashells and material finds included several imports from India, such as a fine gray ware, carnelian,

²⁵ This is contrary to Thapar's (1997: 320) assertion that “the Mauryas, having consolidated their strength in the Ganga plain and the north-west and controlling as they did the routes going south, had little need for further conquest”.

²⁶ Two dates available for the mesolithic at Anuradhapura are around 3900 BC (Deraniyagala, 1992: 740). Evidence for this phase comes from a low mound on the left bank of the Malwattu Oya occupied by microlithic tool using hunter-gatherers.

²⁷ The twenty-two known megalithic sites in Sri Lanka straddle the Iron Age and Early Historic settlements. They vary greatly in appearance from extended burials, pit burials to cairn circles or cist burials (Coningham and Allchin, 1995: 170).

²⁸ S. Deraniyagala, *The Prehistoric Chronology of Sri Lanka, Ancient Ceylon*, 1990, 12,7: 260.

and lapis lazuli. Coins were in evidence for the first time. Another five sherds with portions of Brahmi inscriptions were also recovered (*ibid.*). Of particular interest is the clay sealing from Anuradhapura (pit in period H) with the legend: “Magaha, the Purumaka, son of Tissa.” The same name appears in the Mihintale cave inscription dedicated to the Buddhist Sangha and dated to the third century BCE.

Mihintale, close to Anuradhapura, is the site of the earliest Brahmi inscription found in Sri Lanka. Approximately 1300 Sinhalese inscriptions dated between 3rd century BCE to 1st century have been collected from 269 different sites on the island. The *parumakas* (chiefs) are mentioned in nearly thirty percent of the inscriptions published so far (Paranavitana 1970, vol. I, lxxiv - lxxxvi). The *parumaka* inscriptions do not add their ancestry, but do indicate matrimonial alliances with other chiefs (designated *ay*, *abi*, *devanapiya*). There are also references to *parumakas* involved in a somewhat later period as administrative functionaries, e.g., as *mahamata*, (*ibid.*, vol. I, no. 1202, p. 97), *senapati* (accountant; *ibid.*, vol. I, no. 665, p. 50), *badakarika* (treasurer; *ibid.*, vol. I, no. 725, p. 55), *asa adeka* (superintendent of horses; *ibid.*, vol. I, no. 325, p. 28), and *panita badakarika* (in-charge of warehouse at sea-port; *ibid.*, vol. I, no. 1035, p. 81). It is significant that one of the inscriptions from Duvejala in Polonnaru district is written right to left in the Brahmi script and records the gift of a cave of *barata* Sangharakkhita, *barata* being a term of respect, and has the symbol of a ship (*ibid.*, vol. I no. 270, plate XXV).

The finds of pottery sherds inscribed with Brahmi letters from Iron Age levels in Anuradhapura have raised several questions regarding the traditional view of the introduction of writing from north India to Sri Lanka — questions that I will address below. A majority of the sherds are of locally manufactured coarse and medium black and red ware and the inscriptions were made post-firing. After the early centuries CE, the inscribed sherds decline in frequency.³⁰ The inscriptions comprise either letters or names that are often described as being in Prakrit (e.g., in Conningham and Allchin, 1995), but this issue needs to be re-examined in view of a different perspective presented by Mahadevan (1996). Mahadevan argues for Sinhala-Prakrit (Old Sinhalese) as the language of the inscribed sherds, including one sherd from Kodumanal.³¹

²⁹ According to the Chronicles, it was under Pandukabhaya (c. 390-320 BC) that Anuradhapura became the island's capital.

³⁰ After the early centuries AD the decline in inscribed sherds corresponds to the increasing use of palm-leaf manuscripts. Ivory manuscript covers are attested to in the excavations at Anuradhapura (Conningham & Allchin, 1995: 178).

³¹ Mahadevan's study (1996) has not taken the Anuradhapura material into account, but is based on nine sherds from coastal centres in India dated between second century BCE and the first century AD.

This discussion raises several significant issues: the use of the Brahmi script on pottery many centuries before its adoption for royal stone inscriptions; the reference to *nikama* in the inscribed sherds from Kodumanal; and the multiplicity of communities involved in the early coastal trade, including the Sinhalese. It would then seem that in the pre-Mauryan and Mauryan periods there was a coastal network extending from Gujarat to Sri Lanka, with Kodumanal an important site that tapped onto this route (Ray 1994: chapter II). It was along this commercial network that Buddhism and the use of the Brahmi script spread into the Sri Lanka.

Communication across the Bay of Bengal was multi-directional and there is evidence for continued contact between Sri Lanka and central India in subsequent centuries. A railing inscription from Bharhut records the gift of a monk from Sri Lanka (Cunningham 1892: 16). An early Brahmi inscription found in Sri Lanka at Andiyagala, on the northern bank of the Modaragam Aru, records the construction of a flight of steps by a person who describes himself as ‘the mariner (*navika*) of Bhojakataka’ (Paranavitana 1970, no. 105: 8). Bhojakataka has been identified with the site of Bhatkuli in central India. Two other names of centers in peninsular India that occur in Sri Lankan inscriptions are Nasika (ibid.: no. 706) and Bharukaccha (ibid.: no. 1183) and, in both cases, a *parumaka* or chief is associated with these settlements.

Another region that has provided evidence for ties with Sri Lanka is the lower Krishna valley. At Nagarjunakonda, in the third-fourth centuries CE Buddhists from Sri Lanka built a monastic establishment known as Sihala-vihara and an inscription at the site records that it had its own shrine for a Bodhi tree (*Epigraphia Indica*, 1929-30, 20: F). Sarkar has suggested that sites 43 and 38 at Nagarjunakonda were made for two different Sri Lankan Sinhalese sects: the Theravadins and the Mahaviharavasins (1966: 77). It is interesting that six of the twelve names mentioned at site 43 at Nagarjunakonda are to be found in the *Mahavamsa* account of the conversion of several regions by the Theravadins (Geiger, 1912: 82). Another interesting parallel is to be found in the use of the Old Sinhalese *samuda* (Sanskrit *samudra* and Prakrit *samudda*) as a personal name in the early Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka (Paranavitana, 1970: nos. 69, 774, 1096, 1005 and 1010). The term also occurs as *samuda*, *samudamnika*, *samuda-siri* in the records at Nagarjunakonda (*Epigraphia Indica* XXXV: 34-35).

At Bodhi Gaya, as early as the first century BCE, a pilgrim from Sri Lanka donated a railing around the Bodhi tree. In the fifth century CE, the *sramana* Prakhyatakirti of the royal family of Sri Lanka performed acts of worship at the site (Mitra, 1980: 62). These examples, when taken in conjunction with the data from inscribed sherds discussed earlier, amply illustrate the continuing traffic, both for trade and religious purposes, between India and Sri Lanka in the pre-Mauryan,

Mauryan, and post-Mauryan periods. This continuity is significant for the comprehension and preservation of the legend of Asoka, as will be discussed later.

The Prevalence of Writing

In order to comprehend the role of Mauryan inscriptions, an issue that needs to be addressed at this juncture is the prevalence of writing in the pre-Mauryan and Mauryan periods. Were the inscribed sherds discussed earlier an anachronism or were they indicative of more widespread literacy? How does one explain the earliest occurrence of writing on potsherds? In this regard, there is a singular correspondence between the Harappan and the Mauryan contexts.³² Recent excavations at Harappa (Period 2, 2800-2600 BCE), and Nausharo show the earliest use of abstract symbols inscribed on pottery (prior to or after firing) at least two hundred years before the invention of the Indus script in 2600 BCE and its use on seals. Some of these early symbols are identical to characters used in the later Indus script and also occur in the same sequence (Kenoyer 1998: 69). In the Harappan context, Kenoyer has argued that people who controlled the cities also used these inscribed objects. A similar case for the early beginnings of writing may also be valid for the Mauryan period and the autonomy of the *nigama* may be postulated. It may be argued that it was in the urban centers that there was a requirement for script and it is in this context that references to the *nikama* or *nigama* on potsherds is crucial.

The next issue is the extent to which this widespread use of writing for diverse purposes is evident in the archaeological record. Inscriptions on pottery, in contrast to graffiti, which occurs in Harappan, Chalcolithic, and Megalithic contexts, have an extensive distribution in the early historic period. These inscribed sherds are in addition to the large numbers of unbaked clay sealings and stone seals ubiquitous at archaeological sites in the Indian subcontinent (Thaplyal 1972). Inscribed pottery fragments are found both at monastic and non-monastic sites. Particularly noteworthy in the monastic context are the inscribed bowls and vessels carrying dedicatory inscriptions (Ray 1987: 2-3). Overall, the ceramics bearing inscriptions are varied and include black-and-red ware, all-black ware, Russet

³² Other similarities that have been suggested relate to the system of weights (Kenoyer, 1998: 98-99, 183) and the layout of cities (Kenoyer, 1999). In the Harappan context, the highest concentration of weights has been found inside the city gates, but no such data is available for their distribution in the Mauryan period. It is significant that the same weight system was used for the punch-marked coins. This was first suggested by Kosambi (1941) and followed by Mitchiner (1978) and others in the context of later Indian weight systems. The weight system of the punch-marked coins had widespread acceptability as is evident from its similarity to the lighter weight standard of Indo-Greek coinage south of the Hindu Kush. North of the Hindu Kush lay the area of Graeco-Bactrian coinage based on the Attic standard (Bernard, 1994: 126).

coated painted ware, Rouletted ware, and so on. Of these, fragments with legible inscriptions are few and these in a majority of cases contain names (ibid: 5).

So far, much of the scholarly discussion on the beginnings of writing in the Indian subcontinent has been restricted to the earliest use of the Brahmi script in the Asokan edicts. But any discussion of writing in the Mauryan period must also take into account the presence of the Brahmi script in Sri Lanka. Nearly 1300 inscriptions from the island have been referred to above, a majority of these were incised just below the drip ledge of slightly enlarged natural caves donated to Buddhist monks. The early Brahmi script used for the inscriptions in the oldest Sinhalese language is the same as that used for the Asokan edicts (Paranavitana 1970: xvii). However, in spite of the uniformity in script, there is a marked difference in the language and contents of the inscriptions and there are no parallels to Asoka's *dhammalipi*. Instead the inscriptions of Asoka's contemporaries on the island, Devanampiya Tissa (ibid.: nos.2, 31) and his successor king Uttiya (no. 38), record gifts of caves to the Sangha and incorporate a stereotyped formula of dedication³³ to the Buddhist monks.

We know very little about the transition from graffiti to script or the coexistence of graffiti and the use of the script. A majority of the graffiti is found singly, and this had led scholars to regard it as owners' marks. Mahadevan (1995: 6-7) has recently compared the symbols used in graffiti with those that co-occur in early Brahmi inscriptions from South India and Sri Lanka, and has suggested that these common symbols may have been clan symbols. But perhaps this issue needs greater attention than it has received so far, especially in the context of an earlier study by Lal (1960). Lal studied 61 symbols and had concluded that 47 were common to Megalithic pottery on the one hand, and Harappan and post-Harappan cultures on the other.³⁴

Pre-Mauryan period Buddhist texts further substantiate the multiple uses of writing. There are references to writing (*lekha*), money changing (*rupam*), and accounting (*ganana*) as high *sippas* or occupations (*Vinaya*, IV.6). Upali's parents, while planning a career for their son (ibid I.77), discuss the relative merits and demerits of these professions (Wagle 1995: 174-5). The oldest reference to writing in the Pali Tipitaka is in a tract called the *silas*, embodied in each of the thirteen dialogues which form the first chapter of the first division of the *Suttantas* (Conversational Discourses of the Buddha) called Sila Sutta. *Lekha* (writing) and *lekhaka* (writer) are mentioned in the *Bhikkhu-pacittiya* (2.2) and in the *Bhikkhuni-pacittiya* (49.2). The former work praises writing as a branch of knowledge that is honoured in all countries. These references multiply in the *Jatakas*, particularly Katakaha, Kama, Ruru, Kanha and Kurudhamma jatakas provide us with much more information on writing.

³³ The formula reads: *agata anagata catudisa sagasa*, i.e. of the Sangha of the four quarters, present and not present (Paranavitana, 1970: no. 338).

They refer to the writing of private letters (*eva lekham adaye*, no. 125); and official letters (no. 467). They know of royal proclamations (*raja katihi and raja anapesi*, no. 482). The *Mahavagga* (1.43) likewise mentions an instance and narrates that important family affairs or moral and political maxims were engraved on gold plates (nos. 29 & 276). From the colophon of the Kharosthi *Dhammapada*, we know that the scrolls were referred to as *postaka* (Salomon 1999: 87). A game called *akkharika* (lettering) is mentioned repeatedly in the *Vinaya Pitaka* and the *Nikayas* (*Suttanta* I.1). Jataka no. 125 mentions *phalaka* (wooden writing board) and *varnaka* (wooden pen) as writing materials.³⁵

Buddhism and Asoka

It has long been debated whether Asoka was himself a Buddhist (e.g., Smith 1964: 35, Gokhale 1949: 65), or whether his policies were rooted in the Brahmanical tradition (Ramachandra Dikshitar 1932: 258, 288), or whether it was a non-sectarian ethical concept that Asoka propagated (Thapar 1997: 181). Some scholars have suggested that it may be useful to view the rock inscriptions not “as solid blocks of historical fact, but as flightier pieces of political propaganda, as the campaign speeches of an incumbent politician who seeks not so much to record events as to present an image of himself and his administration to the world” (Strong 1994: 99).

Thapar supports her claim of a non-sectarian *dhamma* of Asoka on the grounds that “an order of *bhikkhus* can only emerge when society is sufficiently prosperous to support such an order and the establishment of the Sangha in the first millennium BCE in the Ganges valley was subsequent to the formation of states in Kosala and Magadha. In order that the king should guard and purify the Sangha as typified in the Buddhist convention regarding Asoka, such a king should by then have appropriated sufficient state power so as to perform this role” (1987: 158). This perspective in a way puts the cart before the horse (Ray 1994a: 403).³⁶

In recent years, Buddhologists have been rethinking the link conventionally drawn between settled monasticism and early Buddhism. There is increasing evidence to indicate that in addition to

³⁴ More recently the issue of the survival of the Indus script has been reviewed by Possehl 1996 (chapter 4).

³⁵ Gombrich (1990: 27) makes a distinction between the use of writing for private and public purposes as opposed to its application to the sacred Buddhist texts. He accepts the evidence for writing in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, but states that the canonical texts were written down only around the second-first centuries BCE. It is for this reason that though the *Vinaya* “mentions every item of property allowed to a monk and every utensil found in a monastery, but it never mentions either manuscripts or writing materials of any kind. But on the other hand there are several references to the need to acquire a text by learning it orally” (ibid: 28).

³⁶ “Wealth means little unless there are things to spend it on: what matters are what things exist and are valued in a cultural environment upon which wealth may be spent. In effect, Buddhism created a commodity that seems not to have existed before: the monastic institution, as such, formed a ready, attractive, and all-accomodating

the two-tiered religious structure of the monk and the lay person evident in the normative tradition of the Theravada, a third category needs to be included — the forest monk. Early Buddhist literature places explicit value on seclusion and meditation. “The Buddha was indeed a saint of the forest whose earliest disciples were forest renunciants and who espoused a dharma essentially of forest renunciation” (Ray 1994a: 67). It is not clear from the available data at what stage classical monasticism developed in early Buddhism. Evidence from the *Nikayas* and the Pali canon seems to suggest that town and village renunciation was normative. But perhaps this should not be taken at face value, as it had “its own agenda to promote” (ibid.). Reference may be made here to the story of the sage Bavari in the *Sutta Nipata* (verses 1011-13). He left Sravasti to settle in the *daksinapatha* with his disciples. They initially subsisted by food gathering but gradually took to agriculture and a *gama* developed in their neighborhood.

This sequence finds further support in archaeological data from the lower Krishna valley. As mentioned earlier, the beginnings of the stupa at Amaravati are dated to the Mauryan period. Archaeological excavations conducted at the twin site of Dharanikota have provided evidence for five periods of occupation from fourth-third centuries BCE to the eleventh century CE. Period I was characterized by NBPW, fragments of inscribed potsherds, fragment of a pillar edict, etc. Period II (second century BCE to the first century CE) was marked by the continuation of the NBPW, punch-marked coins, sculptured panels resembling those of Bharhut, and bricks used in the construction of the gateway (47x30x9 cms; 42x21x9 cms; *Indian Archaeology- A Review 1973-74*: 4-5). Further evidence of pre-Satavahana Buddhist presence comes from the western Deccan. Remnants of third-second century brick stupas have been found at Maheshwar (Sankalia et. al 1958: 21), Kasrawad, about five kilometers from it and at Pauni (Deo and Joshi 1972: 117).

Moving south, Brahmagiri is best known for three copies of minor rock edicts preserved on the upper surface at the bottom of the granite outcrop. About 200 meters to the south-east and further up the hillside there are remnants of an apsidal brick caitya excavated in 1942 and again in 1947 (Wheeler, 1947-48: 186-7). There is no evidence to date the caitya *per se*³⁷, though the brick sizes are similar to those from Dharanikota. A comparison with similar structures from the north is revealing. For example, at Sarnath, a brick apsidal caitya was recorded in the excavations not far from the Asokan pillar (Allchin 1995: 244, figure 11.15). Two more are known from Marshall’s excavations at Sanchi (temples 18 and 40) and were dated by him to the Mauryan period (Marshall 1936: 112-22).

recipient of wealth. As far as we know, no other renunciant tradition matched in this respect the early brilliance and opportunism of Buddhism” (Ray 1994a: 403).

³⁷ There is no trace of a stupa in the apse and the surviving bricks measure 1’5”x 9”x 3-3.5” (Wheeler, 1947-48: 187, fn 1).

This evidence, together with the data for early Buddhist presence in Andhra, raises the agency of the Buddhist clergy in reading and interpreting the Asokan edicts for the benefit of the local populace. The Buddhist clergy are being seen in this paper not as an arm of the state, but as one of the several autonomous nodes in ancient society.³⁸

This stress on ethical and moral values in the minor rock edicts of Asoka referred to above is in keeping with Buddhist teachings to the laity. The *Nikaya* literature makes a concerted attempt to inculcate a sense of moral and ethical values among the laity based on Buddhist ethics and loyalty to the Triratna, viz. Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Discourses in the Brahmajala Sutta and the Samannaphala Sutta of the *Digha Nikaya* emphasize the importance of adhering to the five *silas* or moral values and stress that the lay devotee should concentrate on religious talks on *uposatha* days (also see Sohaib 1995: chapter V).

This close association of Asoka with the spread of Buddhism in peninsular India is a memory that continued in the subsequent centuries. The correlation of a pillar with the caitya continued in the post-Mauryan period in the rock-cut monastic centers of the western Deccan. Elsewhere in the north the freestanding pillars of Asoka seem to have been re-used.³⁹ Significant evidence of the association of Asoka with *dhamma* comes from a second century inscription reading *dhamma rano Asokasirino* on a stone slab from the *mahacaitya* at Salihundam in Andhra located on the river Vamsadhara, about eight kilometers from the coast (*Epigraphia Indica*, 31, 1955-6: no. 14).

It is not known how soon the Brahmi script was forgotten, since both Faxian and Xuanzang claim to have read the inscriptions. Only one of the readings of the edicts, the pillar edict near Pataliputra, is however, correct, and there is unanimity on this between the two Chinese pilgrims. It would seem that renderings of the inscriptions by both Chinese pilgrims were based on an oral tradition that preserved the connection between the edicts and king Asoka. In the oral tradition, the pillars were not edicts, but “ancient sign-posts piously erected by Asoka for the benefit of travelers and pilgrims” (Strong 1983: 20). Both of the Chinese pilgrims refer to several stupas visited by them during their travels, which owed their origins to Asoka. Xuanzang, in fact, mentions eighty-four thousand stupas said to have been erected by Asoka and identifies at least a hundred of them (Beal 1969, vol. II: 93-4). These included sites such as Taxila, Mathura, Ayodhya, Kausambi, etc.

³⁸ Compare the evidence from the *Arthashastra*, which suggests the use of Buddhist monks and nuns for spying, since they had unhindered access to the laity.

³⁹ The Allahabad-Kausambi pillar of Asoka was inscribed at a later date by Samudragupta with his *prasasti* and also records the visit of raja Birbal, a courtier of the Mughal emperor Akbar. Subsequently, Jahangir added another inscription giving his ancestry. The latter was also responsible for the shift of the pillar to the fort at Allahabad (Cunningham, 1879a).

The Legacy of Asoka

It has been suggested that the emergence of successor states and empires in Orissa, Andhra and the western Deccan was virtually impelled by the break-up of the Mauryan state (Thapar 1997: 320). There is little evidence to support this, since there is a time lag between the decline of the Mauryas in the second century BCE and the emergence of the Satavahana dynasty in the first century BCE in the western Deccan. In Andhra and Orissa, on the other hand, the post-Mauryan period is marked by a multiplicity of localized polities referred to as *rajas* in the sources. Nor is there any correspondence in the peninsula between the sites of Asokan inscriptions and the emergence of the local elite.

In the Telengana region, as in the coastal areas of Andhra, there is evidence for culture change from the second-first centuries BCE onwards largely as a result of interaction between the local megalithic communities and trading groups from the north often accompanied by Buddhist monks and nuns. The results of this interaction are noticeable in the archaeological record. They include changes in burial practices as well as shifts in settlement pattern. Thus, excavations at the site of Kotalingala on the Godavari River have unearthed evidence for structures with rubble foundations, mud walls and tiled roofs, while a large number of megalithic burial and habitation sites are located within a radius of 100 kms. Other significant changes are noticeable in the numismatic record. These include the emergence of localized political elites, as well as the adoption and use of coinage by the regional communities. On the basis of lead coins with legends, Gupta (1990) has identified several local dynasties: Kuras in the Panchaganga basin (Kolhapur); Sadakanas around Chitaldurg district; Hastin in the Krishna valley; and Sadas in the Mahisaka country. This is further substantiated by numismatic evidence and the finds of coins of Samagopa, Gobhadra, Satyabhadra and Damabhadra from Karimnagar district (Parabrahma Sastry 1978), while names such as Kamvaya and Narana have been read on some copper coins from Kotalingala (Sastri 1982: 4). Other groups of chieftains in the region were perhaps the *maharathis* and the *mahatalavaras*. In the pre-Satavahana levels at Polakonda, a potin⁴⁰ coin was found with the legend “*mahatalavarasa Vijasamikasa Seva Sabha*” and the same legend also occurs on a terracotta seal from Peddabankur (Krishna Sastry 1983: 129). In contrast, the absence of a megalithic substratum in the western Deccan is reflected in the emergence of market centers along the trade routes in the post-Mauryan period. Numismatic data suggests that power was held by some form of an urban corporate body, also referred to by the term *nigama* (Gupta 1971: 37-40).

⁴⁰ An alloy of copper, zinc, lead and tin

The large hoards of coins found in early Andhra are significant indicators of the increasing influence and power of trading communities. One of the largest hoards of silver punch-marked coins, comprising 7668 coins, has been reported from Amaravati. Many of the symbols on these and the punch-marked coins from the Singavaram hoard, Krishna district, are unique to the region. This evidence, together with the data from the large number of die-struck uninscribed and inscribed coins and the Satavahana coins in copper, lead, potin, and silver raises a basic question regarding the agency responsible for the minting of coins in early Andhra.

To recapitulate, in the post-Mauryan period, urban centers in the western Deccan evolved from exchange and market centers largely as a result of the expansion of trade. In Andhra, on the other hand, urban centers were in most cases, associated with localized chieftains and *rajas* as a result of the growing power of indigenous, megalithic, communities. The pace of change and inputs from the trading communities were, however, uneven and it is along the trans-peninsular route starting from the lower Krishna valley that there are references to the *nigama* and the *gosthi*, in addition to those to the *raja*.

Nowhere, however, does the legacy of Asoka survive as strongly as in the Buddhist literary tradition. As with historians, there was no unanimity in the past regarding the contribution of Asoka and two divergent views seem to have emerged. The first is the Pali version of the legend of Asoka preserved in the Sri Lankan Chronicles and the second is the north Indian version known from Sanskrit and Chinese sources (Strong 1994: 100). The *Mahavamsa*, the earliest Pali Chronicle of Sri Lanka dated to the late fourth or early fifth century CE, traces the history of the island from the advent of Vijaya in 483 BCE to the present. Its authorship is attributed to a Buddhist monk Mahanama who wrote under the patronage of a Sri Lankan king. The Buddha himself is said to have traveled to the island and the Chronicles present detailed accounts of his three visits. Asoka's concept of Dharmavijaya is restated in the Chronicle leading to a symbiosis between the monarch and the Sangha. There are references to Devanampiyatissa (250-210 BCE) being re-consecrated by envoys of Asoka, thus marking an integration of the concepts of the universal monarch (*cakkavatti*) and the great man (*mahapurisa*, the Buddha himself) (ibid: 53). This is a model that is known to have been emulated by several sovereigns in Sri Lanka, the most prominent being Dutthagamani (101-77 BCE). In Burma also, kings constantly invoked Asoka's example, and the Khmer ruler Jayavarman VII (1181-1215) saw himself as the living Buddha (Gombrich 1994: 6). In the Chronicles the emphasis is on the purification of the Sangha by Asoka and the dispatch of Buddhist missionaries not only to different parts of the subcontinent, but also to Suvarnabhumi, and most of all to Sri Lanka.

Few of these missionary activities find mention in the north Indian tradition as preserved in the Sanskrit *Avadanas*. Instead these focus on Asoka's relationship with the Buddhist monk Upagupta who accompanied him on his pilgrimage to the different sites associated with the life of the Buddha. The *Asokavadana* is known to have been compiled in the second century CE in the Buddhist milieu of northwest India (Strong 1983: 3). In the *Asokavadana*, Asoka is said to be physically ugly, to have a rough skin, and to have been disliked by his father and the women of his harem (Strong, 1983: 206). The overall perspective on Asoka's kingship "remains one of ambiguity, exalting his righteousness at times, but ever wary of his power potential" (Strong 1994: 109).

One of the episodes much developed in the *Asokavadana* relates to the slaying of his brothers by Asoka to gain the throne (ibid.). It is not surprising then that the term *devanampiya* or *devanampriya* (beloved of the gods) undergoes a gradual transformation in Sanskrit. In accordance with a rule of Panini (vi.3, 21; *sasthyakrose*) the genitive affix is to be retained in compounds only when denoting affront or insult. Both Katyayana (350 BCE) and Patanjali (150 BCE) mention *devanampriya* as an exception to the rule. It continued to be used as an honorific title until the seventh century as indicated by its use in the *Harsacarita* (p. 219, line 14). About a century later, Sankara in his commentary on the Brahmasutra introduced an ironic twist to the term, e.g., a wise opponent (Hara 1969: 22). From about the middle of the first millennium onwards the term underwent a change that climaxed in the commentary of the grammarian Bhattojidsit on Panini. He disallowed the exception and translated *devanam priya* as a term of contempt implying a fool (*murkha*) devoid of knowledge of Brahma (Palsule, 1969: 151).

In the past, scholars have often underplayed the evidence from the *Mahavamsa* on the grounds that it was a "conscious redaction of the tradition" of Asoka's rule with the sole objective of legitimizing the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka (Bechert 1978: 6-7). A distinction is made between the tolerant Asoka and his non-denominational *dhamma* as evident from his inscriptions and the concept of the Buddhist State as proposed in the *Mahavamsa* (ibid.).

The reality may perhaps be sought in between the two extreme positions. Certainly the minor rock edicts in Karnataka refer to Asoka as a Buddhist *upasaka*. Buddhism was also the dominant canonical religion of peninsular India in the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods, in marked contrast to its position in north India, where Buddhism had to compete with Jainism and Brahmanism. Thus, the emphases in the *Mahavamsa* on the coalescing of the Sangha and the State, as well as rituals that made this possible need not necessarily be seen as attempts by the Orthodoxy to reap substantive benefits

(ibid: 87)⁴¹, but instead as a reflection of the reality in the peninsula. In his edicts Asoka praises ceremonies performed for religious purposes (*maha-[pha]le [e] dhamma-mangale*), but decries those performed on the occasion of births, illnesses, and weddings (rock edict IX; Sircar 1979: 40). There are references to several religious ceremonies in his inscriptions, such as visits to the Bodhi tree and chanting of Buddhist scriptures, among others. Rock Edict VIII dates Asoka's *dhammayata* (pilgrimage) to Sambodhi or the sacred Bodhi tree at Gaya ten years after his consecration (CII, vol. I: 14). In the Bairat rock edict, Asoka recommends the study and reflection of seven texts of the Buddhist canon (CII, vol. I: 173). At Bodh Gaya the installation of a polished sandstone throne (*vajrasana*) found by Cunningham (*Annual Report, Archaeological Survey of India, 1908-9*: 153-4) in a shrine at the foot of the Bodhi tree is attributed to Asoka.

Buddhist literature and religious practice

A recurrent theme in early Buddhist canonical literature is the need to provide ideological justification for several popular customs and observances prevalent among the monks and lay devotees. One of the issues that continued to be debated was the acceptability of the stupa-cult or worship of the stupa by the monastic order. Other issues addressed in the texts concerned the inclusion of an elaborate ritual for worship and the sanction of magical practices.

The origins of stupa worship are obscure and it is not quite certain whether this practice was assimilated from an earlier tradition of veneration of a tumulus or was newly initiated. It was nevertheless one of the fundamental institutions of early Buddhism. The Nigalisagara pillar inscription of Asoka refers to a stupa in the Nepalese *terai* dedicated to the Buddha's mythical predecessors and enlarged and embellished by Asoka (Sircar 1975: 61). Asoka is also credited with the setting up of a stupa and pillar at Sanchi, about 10 kilometers from Vidisha, as well as the Dharmarajika stupa at Sarnath with an inscribed pillar in front.

Asoka's performance of worship and ceremonies associated with Buddhism is further supported by sculptural data from monastic sites. Amongst the reliefs at Sanchi are several representations of congregational and ceremonial stupa worship by lay devotees with music and floral offerings (Marshall and Foucher, 1982, vol. II: plates 12, 15, 26, 32, 33, 36, 41, 43, 45, 47, 48, 60, 62, and 63). As evidenced by references in the *Mahavastu*, stupa worship had developed its own elaborate ritual by the early centuries CE. This involved circumambulation; obeisance; the offerings of flowers, incense, cotton and silk clothes; the placing of lights; and striking up of instrumental music (II: 362-4).

⁴¹ The Sri Lankan Chronicles make vividly clear that Orthodoxy saw substantive benefits accruing to the Dhamma by the celebration of its power through ritual. Indeed one of the more obvious emphases throughout the record of the *Mahavamsa* ending with the reign of Mahasena (274-301) are its elaborate and unrestrained paeans

Another far-reaching development in early Buddhism was the worship of relics. In the beginning, the relics involved were corporeal relics of the Buddha himself. Gradually the scope was enlarged and by the beginning of the Christian era, not only the bone relics of the monks were included, but also precious objects of gold, silver, pearls, crystal, lapis lazuli, and so on. This is substantiated by finds of relic caskets from early sites in peninsular India, such as Amaravati and Bhattiprolu. Ten caskets of varying sizes and shapes and made from different materials were recovered from Amaravati and were dated between the second century BCE and the second century CE. These included crystal caskets with pearls and gold leaves, gold reliquaries, bone and ivory articles, and a seal of lapis lazuli with Brahmi characters (Subrahmanyam 1999: 38-9). Another rich site is Bhattiprolu, which yielded five relic caskets. Some of these were placed inside granite stone containers bearing Brahmi inscriptions. All of the inscriptions were whitened, similar to the treatment of the Mauryan edicts at Erragudi and Rajulamandagiri (ibid.: 52-3).

The practice of pilgrimage to centers associated with the life of the Buddha was related to the beginnings of the stupa and relic cults. References in the *Digha Nikaya* (Mahaparinibbana Sutta, 5.8) indicate that the Buddha encouraged pilgrimage to centers associated with his life. While addressing Ananda, he states that four places that believing clansmen should visit are: where the Tathagata was born; where the Tathagata attained Enlightenment; where the Tathagata preached; and where the Tathagata attained *nibbana* (Rhys Davids 1881: 153-54). And those who die while performing *cetiya-carikam* (pilgrimage) will be born after death in heaven (*saggam lokam*). These four basic pilgrimage sites of Kapilavastu (birth), Bodhgaya (enlightenment), Varanasi (first sermon) and Kusinagara (death) were gradually expanded to include other centers and eight pilgrimage sites are referred to in the Gupta period. The situation, however, seems to have been quite fluid, as there is no agreement between the textual references and the Gupta stele depictions.⁴²

Perhaps the earliest pilgrim was the Mauryan ruler Asoka who visited the site of Buddha's birthplace at Lumbini as commemorated in his pillar inscription at the site. It is significant that Asoka repeats the exact formula stated in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, i.e., 'Here was the Tathagata born,' in his Lumbini pillar inscription. A legend in the *Divyavadana* (Cowell and Neil ed. 1886: 389-90) dates this event to the twentieth regnal year of the king. Some of the other pilgrimage sites are also marked by Asokan pillars, including Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, Samkasya and Vaisali. There are also several illustrations at Sanchi and Bharhut of homage at sacred sites. The depiction of Asoka's pilgrimage to

in response to the rituals of stupa building, relic worship, revering of the Bodhi tree and other forms of paying homage to the Buddha (Bechert, 1978: 87).

⁴² Patricia E. Karetzky, The Act of Pilgrimage and Guptan Steles with Scenes from the Life of the Buddha, *Oriental Art*, XXIII, 1987: 268-74.

the Bodhi tree and his encounter with the nagas at Ramagrama at Sanchi closely follow the description in the *Asokavadana* (Dehejia 1997: 39). The evidence regarding the war over the Buddha's relics and their encasement in the eight stupas at the time of his death further substantiates the tremendous appeal of pilgrimage and the continuation of a tradition that in all probability pre-dates the beginnings of Mauryan rule.

Sculptural representations from the second century BCE site of Bharhut provide evidence for the construction and worship of shrines associated with the life of the Buddha. The relief depicts an elaborate two-storied structure built on a brick base enshrining a seat placed on pilasters and worshipped by four devotees. The inscription reads: *bhagvata saka munino bodho* (the enlightenment of lord Sakyamuni). On the evidence of the Chinese pilgrim Faxian, it would seem that in the early centuries CE, a tower marked the spot of the Buddha's enlightenment. Though there is no direct evidence for this, this premise may be supported by the depiction on a terracotta plaque from Kumrahar of a five-tiered temple surrounded by an open railing with an image of the Buddha in *abhayamudra* inside the shrine (Myer 1958: 283-4).

A theme on which there seems to be some degree of unanimity in Buddhist sources is the role of royal advisor attributed to Buddhist monks. Arahanta Mahinda is credited with advising king Devanampiya Tissa to send a mission to the Mauryan ruler Asoka (*Mahavamsa*, chapter VIII, v. 1-4). Subsequent Sri Lankan rulers such as prince Uttiya, the brother of king Kelani Tissa was educated by the Thera Kelani Tissa and was also the teacher and advisor of the ruling house of Kelaniya (*Mahavamsa*, chapter XXII, v. 13-6). In the context of Asoka, the *Mahavamsa* (chapter V, v. 79-80) associates Arahanta Moggaliputtatissa as the advisor to the king, while the *Divyavadana* (p. 570) ascribes the role to Thera Upagupta.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to re-examine the nature of Mauryan control in peninsular India vis-à-vis the contribution of trading groups and Buddhist monastics. My underlying objective has been to draw attention to the constructs that have conventionally been used for the study of the Mauryan Empire. In recent years, Thapar (1984: 114, 160) has shifted her position on the Mauryan Empire and has now termed it a 'metropolitan state' with flexible control in the peripheral areas.⁴³ This paper has

⁴³ Magadha was a metropolitan state not a primary state, with flexible control. The metropolitan state initiated conquest and control over the core areas of the empire. The large numbers of peripheral areas, which had a variegated economic structure continued as before. The control of the metropolitan state over the peripheral

tried to show that even within this model of a metropolitan state, Asoka's presence in peninsular India was no more than that of a Buddhist *upasaka* preaching a *dhamma* of ethical and moral values. Perhaps the larger issue that this paper has raised is the extent to which the history of peninsular India continues to be refracted through the lens of developments that took place in the Ganga plains. Peninsular India, when studied in the context of its internal dynamics, presents a somewhat different picture of social and economic change. This is not to suggest that the region developed in isolation from the north. On the contrary, this paper has sought to emphasize the role of trading groups and religious functionaries in forging and opening channels of communication. It may perhaps be useful to conclude by contrasting the Mauryan experience in peninsular India with that in other peripheral regions such as eastern India or the northwest with a view to a holistic understanding of the control of the state. But only a summary treatment of these regions is possible within the scope of this paper.

Mauryan presence in eastern India is predicated on the 1931 find of a stone slab with a Prakrit inscription in Brahmi script from the site of Mahasthangarh in Bogra district of present Bangladesh. The inscription has been variously dated from the third century BCE (Thapar 1997: 7) to the second century BCE (Tinti 1996: 33-39). Based on the inscription, Thapar associates Mahasthangarh with "the headquarters of the local administrator (of the eastern section of the empire), its name during that period having been Pundranagara" (1997: 233). Traditionally, Mauryan presence in the region has been based on finds of NBPW sherds and punch-marked coins from the sites of Mahasthangarh, Tamluk, and Chandraketugarh. No structural remains of the Mauryan period have so far been found in the archaeological excavations in Bengal.

On the contrary, renewed excavations at Mahasthangarh have provided geological data to suggest that the earliest settlement at the site dates to the post-Mauryan period (Gill 1999: 156). It was between the second century BCE and the second century CE that sites in the coastal area became active and this was marked by a quantitative and qualitative improvement in the material culture (Sengupta 1996: 120). What is significant is evidence for the presence of Buddhism in Bengal around the second-first centuries BCE. Inscriptions from Sanchi in central India record gifts from inhabitants of Punyavardhana, identified with Pundravardhana or Bengal (Majumdar 1940: nos. 278, 594).

Another region that needs close scrutiny is the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. "The discovery of Greek and Aramaic inscriptions points not only to Mauryan control over parts of Afghanistan and the presence of Greek and Aramaic-Iranian speakers in the area, but also to Asoka's

areas would be through administration, the upper levels under central authority and the lower levels under local authority. This bifurcation would be possible if the major concern of the metropolitan state was to collect tax and tribute and even plunder during campaigns but not to restructure the economy of the peripheral areas in an attempt to integrate it and bring it into a uniform pattern (Thapar, 1984: 160).

emphasis on maintaining a dialogue with people whom he regarded as important. It has been suggested that these were the areas described as *yonakamboja* where *yona* clearly referred to Hellenized Greeks and *kamboja* to the Iranians” (Thapar 1997: 276). The picture provided by archaeological excavations in the region is somewhat more complex. The data from the site of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, for example, suggests a major fortified settlement in pre-Achaemenid times (Allchin 1995: 127). Asoka ordered his edicts to be translated into Greek at Kandahar and two of the Greek inscriptions found at the site paraphrase some of the fourteen rock edicts of Asoka. These translations, in their search to provide adequate equivalents of Indian concepts, indicate an intimate knowledge of the A Greek romance of the Hellenistic period also tells the story of a ‘Philhellenic’ Mauryan emperor who rescued a ship-wrecked Greek on the coast of Bengal and has him escorted through his territories as far as the Persian border (Diodorus II.55-60).current language of Greek philosophy.

A distinction has perhaps to be made between the regions north of the Indus and those south of the river, the former providing evidence for a larger Greek presence than the latter. The number of Greek mercenaries left behind by Alexander in regions north of the Hindu Kush was far from negligible and Classical sources quote different figures. Arrian (IV.22) refers to 13,500 soldiers in the Oxus valley, while another 4,600 are referred to in Arachosia (Curtius VII.3-4). In addition were the pensioned soldiers settled in newly founded towns (Dani and Bernard 1994: 88). After the death of Alexander (323 BCE), it was under Seleucus I (c. 305-304 BCE) that these Greek populations reappear in history. One of the cities that owes its rise to this period is located at the site of Ay Khanum at the confluence of the rivers Oxus and the Kokcha. The natural defense provided by the rivers was completed by the construction of massive ramparts of unbaked brick (ibid: 92). Ay Khanum has been described as a “royal city whose administration centered around a palace” (Bernard 1994: 106).

Classical Greek authors refer to the fact that Greek colonists lived in the region alongside the indigenous populations and that the administration of the cities lay in the hands of the Greek communities. The colonists also preserved the Greek language and the script (ibid: 105). One would, therefore, have expected to find Greek-style temples in Bactria. It therefore comes as a surprise that the architecture of the temples at Ay Khanum owed nothing to Greek tradition and was instead dedicated to a non-Greek cult whose precise identification remains unclear. Buddhism, seems to have had an impact on Greek society and one of the important converts to Buddhism was the Indo-Greek

ruler Menander (150-135 BCE) as described in the text *Milindapanha*.⁴⁴ A local governor of Gandhara, Meridarch Theodoros, is also known to have dedicated a Buddhist reliquary in Swat. Brahmanical deities like Krsna and Balarama appear on the coinage of Agathocles (ibid), while Heliodoros, ambassador of the Indo-Greek king Antialcidas at the court of the ruler of Vidisa was a follower of the cult of Vasudeva.⁴⁵

In contrast to these sites further north of the Indus, the presence of NBPW and silver bar punch-marked coins from Taxila indicates strong connections with the Ganga valley material culture from its beginning. On the basis of radiocarbon dates, this earliest settlement at the site has been dated to the last two decades of the fifth century BCE (Allchin 1995: 131). The process of integration seems to have intensified in the subsequent periods from the first century BCE to the third-fourth centuries CE, which was marked by a qualitative growth in the network of urban settlements. Already existing urban areas were enlarged and there was a horizontal division of cities into different parts with religious buildings, especially Buddhist shrines and temples, coming up in the suburbs (Litvinsky 1994: 229).

What is significant for this paper is the fact that as in peninsular India, as also in eastern India and regions beyond the Hindu Kush, the process of socioeconomic change really develops a century after the Mauryas. There is little evidence for Mauryan control in these areas, but what is evident is the opening up of the peripheral regions to the spread of Buddhism and expansion of trading activity.

In the final analysis, Asoka may have represented different things to different people both in his lifetime and after his death. But one thing is certain, in the Mauryan period several of the social and economic innovations developed into forces that resulted in the opening up of channels of communication, trade, and religious proselytization across the subcontinent and overseas, into Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. In this, Asoka's vision surpassed by far that of many of his contemporaries and successors.

⁴⁴ This is, however, not reflected in the surviving coins, which represent him as a Hellenistic king together with the legend, 'Menander, the Saviour' on the obverse and with Athena on the reverse.

⁴⁵ Sanskrit sources, such as the grammarian Patanjali and Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitram*, on the other hand refer to incursions by the *yavanas* into *madhyadesa* and hostility between the Greeks and the rulers of the Ganga plains.

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